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At the Mind's Limits

CONTEMPLATIONS BY A SURVIVOR
ON AUSCHWITZ AND ITS REALITIES

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At the Mind's Limits

TAKE CARE, a well-meaning friend advised me when he heard of my plan to speak on the intellectual in Auschwitz. He emphatically recommended that I deal as little as possible with Auschwitz and as much as possible with the intellectual problems. He said further that I should be discreet and, if at all feasible, avoid including Auschwitz in the title. The public, he felt, was allergic to this geographical, historical, and political term. There were, after all, enough books and documents of every kind on Auschwitz already, and to report on the horrors would not be to relate anything new. I am not certain that my friend is right and for that reason I will hardly be able to follow his advice. I don't have the feeling that as much has been written about Auschwitz as, let's say, about electronic music or the Chamber of Deputies in Bonn. Also, I still wonder whether it perhaps would not be a good idea to introduce certain Auschwitz books into the upper classes of secondary schools as compulsory reading, and in general whether quite a few niceties must not be disregarded if one wants to pursue the history of political ideas. It is true that here I do not want to talk purely about Auschwitz, to give a documentary report, but rather I have determined to talk about the confrontation of Auschwitz and *intellect*. In the process, however, I cannot bypass what one calls the horrors, those occurrences before which, as Brecht once put it, hearts are strong but the nerves are weak. My subject is: At the Mind's Limits. That

these limits happen to run alongside the so unpopular horrors is not my fault.

If I want to talk about the intellectual or, as one would have said earlier, about the cultivated man, in Auschwitz, I will first have to define my subject, that same intellectual. Who is, in the sense of the word that I have adopted, an intellectual or a cultivated man? Certainly not every practitioner of a so-called higher profession; advanced formal training is perhaps a necessary condition, but it certainly is not enough in itself. All of us know lawyers, engineers, doctors, probably even scholars who may be intelligent and perhaps even outstanding in their fields, but whom nonetheless one can hardly designate as intellectuals. An intellectual, as I wish to define him here, is a person who lives within what is a spiritual frame of reference in the widest sense. His realm of thought is an essentially humanistic one, that of the liberal arts. He has a well-developed esthetic consciousness. By inclination and ability he tends toward abstract trains of thought. Sequences of ideas from the area of intellectual history occur to him at every occasion. If one asks him, for example, what famous name begins with the syllables "Lilien," he does not think of the glider constructor Otto von Lilienthal but of the poet Detlev von Liliencron. When presented with the cue word "society," he does not take it in its mundane sense, but rather sociologically. The physical process that produces a short circuit does not interest him, but he is well informed about Neidhart von Reuenthal, the courtly poet of village lyrics.

We will take such an intellectual then, a man who can recite great poetry by the stanza, who knows the famous paintings of the Renaissance as well as those of Surrealism, who is familiar with the history of philosophy and of music, and place him in a borderline situation, where he has to confirm the reality and effectiveness of his intellect, or to declare its impotence: in Auschwitz.

Therewith, naturally, I present myself. In a double capacity, as a Jew and as a member of the Belgian resistance movement, besides in Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, and still other concentration camps, I also spent a year in Auschwitz, more exactly in the auxiliary camp Auschwitz-Monowitz. For that reason the little word "I" will have to appear here more often than I like, namely wherever I cannot take for granted that others have shared my personal experience.

In the context of our discussion we must first consider the *external*

situation of the intellectual, one that moreover was common to everyone else, including the nonintellectuals in the so-called higher professions. It was not a good situation, and it evidenced itself most dramatically in the question of the work assignment, which decided over life and death. The craftsmen in Auschwitz-Monowitz were mostly assigned according to their trades, as long as—for whatever reasons that will not be discussed here—they were not gassed on the spot. A machinist, for example, was a privileged man, since he could be used in the planned IG-Farben factory and had the chance to work in a covered shop that was not exposed to the elements. The same holds true for the electrician, the plumber, the cabinetmaker, or carpenter. A tailor or a shoemaker perhaps had the good luck to land in a room where work was done for the SS. For the bricklayer, the cook, the radio technician, the auto mechanic, there was the slight chance of a bearable work spot and thus of survival.

The situation was different for the inmate who had a higher profession. There awaited him the fate of the businessman, who likewise belonged to the *Lumpenproletariat* of the camp, that is, he was assigned to a labor detail, where one dug dirt, laid cables, and transported sacks of cement or iron crossbeams. In the camp he became an unskilled laborer, who had to do his job in the open—which meant in most cases that the sentence was already passed on him. Certainly, there were also differences. In the camp chosen here as an example, chemists, for instance, were employed in their profession, as was my barracks mate Primo Levi from Turin, who wrote the Auschwitz book *If That Be a Man*. For physicians there was the possibility to find refuge in the so-called sick huts, even if it certainly did not exist for all. The Viennese physician Dr. Viktor Frankl, for example, who today is a world-renowned psychologist, was for years a ditchdigger in Auschwitz-Monowitz. In general, one can say that at the work site the representatives of the higher professions were badly off. That is why many sought to conceal their profession. Whoever possessed even a bit of manual skill and perhaps was able to work with simple tools boldly declared himself a craftsman. To be sure, that meant he was possibly risking his life, namely if it emerged that he had lied. The majority, in any event, tried their luck at playing themselves down. The gymnasium or university professor, when asked about his vocation, timidly said "teacher," in order not to provoke the violent rage of the SS man or the Kapo. The lawyer transformed himself into the plainer bookkeeper, the

journalist perhaps passed himself off as a typesetter, in which case there was little danger that he would have to provide proof of his ability at this trade. And so the university professors, lawyers, librarians, economists, and mathematicians dragged rails, pipes, and construction beams. For these tasks they brought with them mostly little skill and but slight bodily strength, and only in rare instances did it take long before they were eliminated from the labor process and ended up in the main camp, where the gas chambers and crematories stood.

If their situation at the work site was difficult, it was no better inside the camp. Camp life demanded above all bodily agility and physical courage that necessarily bordered on brutality. The intelligentsia were only seldom blessed with both, and the moral courage that they often tried to employ in place of the physical was not worth a trifle. Assume for a moment that we had to prevent a professional pickpocket from Warsaw from stealing our shoelaces. Circumstances permitting, an uppercut certainly helped, but by no means that intellectual courage through which perhaps a political journalist endangers his career by printing a displeasing article. Superfluous to say that only very rarely did the lawyer or gymnasium teacher know how to execute an uppercut properly; rather, he was far more often the receiver, and in taking it hardly more able than in giving it. In matters of camp discipline things were also bad. Those who on the outside had practiced a higher profession generally possessed little talent for bedmaking. I recall educated and cultivated comrades who, dripping with sweat, battled every morning with their straw mattress and blankets and still achieved no proper results, so that later, at the work site, they were plagued by the fear—which grew into an obsession—that on their return they would be punished with a beating or the withdrawal of food. They were up to neither bedmaking nor a brisk response to the command “Caps off!” and when the occasion arose, they were totally unable to find that mode of speech vis-à-vis the senior block inmate or the SS man that was both submissive and yet self-assured, and with which threatening danger could possibly be averted. In the camp, therefore, they were as little respected even by higher-ranked prisoners and comrades as they were at the work site by civilian laborers and Kapos.

Still worse: they didn’t even find *friends*. For in most cases, it was physically impossible for them spontaneously to use the camp slang, which was the only accepted form of mutual communication. Modern intellec-

tuals quarrel a great deal about their communication difficulties and in the process talk a lot of pure nonsense, which would better remain unsaid. Well, in the camp there truly was a problem of communication between the intellectual and the majority of his comrades. It presented itself hourly in a real and painful way. For the prisoner who was accustomed to a somewhat refined manner of expression, it was possible only with much effort to overcome his distaste for saying “Beat it!” or to address a fellow prisoner exclusively with “Hey, you.” Only too well do I recall the physical disgust that regularly seized me when an otherwise quite proper and sociable comrade inevitably found no other form of address for me than “my dear fellow.” The intellectual suffered from such expressions as “grub sarge” or “to organize” (which designated the illegal appropriation of some object); yes, even such set phrases as “to go on transport” he uttered only with difficulty and hesitatingly.

But now I have arrived at the basic psychological and existential problems of camp life and at the situation of the intellectual in the narrower sense outlined at the start. Reduced to its most concise form the question that arises is: did intellectual background and an intellectual basic disposition help a camp prisoner in the decisive moments? Did they make survival easier for him? When I put this question to myself I thought first off not of my own day-to-day existence in Auschwitz but of the lovely book of a Dutch friend and comrade in fate, the writer Nico Rost. The book is called *Goethe in Dachau*. I picked it up again after many years and read sentences in it that seemed quite dreamlike to me. For example: “This morning I wanted to go through my notes on Hyperion.” Or: “Again read about Maimonides, of his influence on Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus.” Or: “Today during the air raid warning I tried to think about Herder. . . .” And then, totally surprising for me: “Read still more, study still more, and more intensively. In every free moment! Classical literature as a substitute for Red Cross packages.” When I contemplated these sentences and confronted them with my own camp memories, I was deeply ashamed, because I have nothing to compare with Nico Rost’s admirable, radically intellectual bearing. No, I definitely would have read nothing about Maimonides, even if—but this was hardly imaginable in Auschwitz—I had come across a book on him. During an air raid warning I certainly would have made no attempt to ponder on Herder. And more despairingly than scornfully

I would have rejected the unreasonable demand that I accept classical literature as a substitute for a food package. As I said, I was much ashamed when I read the book of my comrade from Dachau, until I finally succeeded in exculpating myself somewhat. In doing so, perhaps I did not consider as much that Nico Rost worked in a relatively privileged position as an orderly in a sick barracks (whereas I myself belonged to the anonymous mass of the prisoners) as I did the decisive fact that the Dutchman had been in Dachau, not in Auschwitz. Indeed, it is not simple to find a common denominator for these two camps.

Dachau was one of the first National-Socialist concentration camps and thus had, if you will, a tradition; Auschwitz had been created only in 1940 and to the end was subject to improvisations from day to day. In Dachau the *political* element predominated among the inmates; in Auschwitz, however, by far the great majority of prisoners consisted of totally unpolitical Jews and politically very inconstant Poles. The internal administration of Dachau lay for the most part in the hands of political prisoners; in Auschwitz German professional criminals set the tone. In Dachau there was a camp library; for the ordinary inmate of Auschwitz a book was something hardly still imaginable. In Dachau—as well as in Buchenwald—the prisoners had in principle the possibility to oppose the SS state, the SS structure, with an intellectual structure. That gave the intellect there a *social function*, even if this manifested itself essentially in political, religious, or ideological ways and only in rare cases, as that of Nico Rost, at the same time philosophically and esthetically. In Auschwitz, however, the intellectual person was isolated, thrown back entirely upon himself. Thus the problem of the confrontation of intellect and horror appeared in a more radical form and, if the expression is permitted here, in a *purier* form. In Auschwitz the intellect was nothing more than itself and there was no chance to apply it to a social structure, no matter how insufficient, no matter how concealed it may have been. Thus the intellectual was alone with his intellect, which was nothing other than pure content of consciousness, and there was no social reality that could support and confirm it. The examples that come to mind in this context are in part trivial; in part, however, they must be taken from realms of existence that can scarcely be portrayed.

In the beginning, at least, the intellectual still constantly searched for the possibility to give social expression to his thought. In a conversation

with a bunkmate, for instance, who talked at length about his wife's daily menu, he was anxious to slip in the observation that at home he himself had done lots of reading. But when for the thirtieth time he received the answer: "Shit, man!"—he left off. So it was that in Auschwitz everything intellectual gradually took on a doubly new form: on the one hand, psychologically, it became something completely unreal, and on the other hand, to the extent that one defines it in social terms, a kind of forbidden luxury. Sometimes one experienced these new facts at deeper levels than those one can reach during a bunk-bed conversation; then the intellect very abruptly lost its basic quality: its transcendence.

I recall a winter evening when after work we were dragging ourselves, out of step, from the IG-Farben site back into the camp to the accompaniment of the Kapo's unnerving "left, two, three, four," when—for God-knows-what reason—a flag waving in front of a half-finished building caught my eye. "The walls stand speechless and cold, the flags clank in the wind," I muttered to myself in mechanical association. Then I repeated the stanza somewhat louder, listened to the words sound, tried to track the rhythm, and expected that the emotional and mental response that for years this Hölderlin poem had awakened in me would emerge.² But nothing happened. The poem no longer transcended reality. There it was and all that remained was objective statement: such and such, and the Kapo roars "left," and the soup was watery, and the flags are clanking in the wind. Perhaps the Hölderlin feeling, encased in psychic humus, would have surfaced if a comrade had been present whose mood would have been somewhat similar and to whom I could have recited the stanza. The worst was that one did not have this comrade; he was not in the work ranks, and where was he in the entire camp? If one ever did succeed in turning him up, then he was so alienated by his own isolation from all things intellectual that he no longer reacted. In this regard I recall my meeting with a well-known philosopher from Paris, who was in the camp. I had learned of his presence and had searched him out in his block, not without effort and risk. We trudged through the camp streets with our tin ration can under our arm, and, to no avail, I attempted to get an intellectual conversation under way. The philosopher from the Sorbonne gave monosyllabic, mechanical answers and finally grew silent entirely. Is the explanation that his senses had become blunted? Definitely not. The man had not become insensitive, no more than I had. He simply no longer

believed in the reality of the world of the mind, and he rejected an intellectual word game that here no longer had any social relevance.

A special set of problems in connection with the social function or nonfunction of the intellect arose for the Jewish intellectual of *German educational and cultural background*. No matter to what he turned, it did not belong to him, but to the enemy. Beethoven. But he was being conducted in Berlin by Furtwängler, and Furtwängler was a respected official figure of the Third Reich. On Novalis there were essays in the *Völkische Beobachter* and at times they were not at all that stupid. Nietzsche belonged not only to Hitler, something one could have gotten over, but also to the poet Ernst Bertram, who sympathized with the Nazis; he understood him. From the *Merseburger Zaubersprüche* to Gottfried Benn, from Buxtehude to Richard Strauss, the spiritual and esthetic heritage had passed over into the uncontested and uncontestable ownership of the enemy. A comrade who had once been asked about his profession had foolishly told the truth that he was a Germanist, and that had provoked a murderous outburst of rage from an SS man. In those same days, across the ocean in the USA, Thomas Mann, I believe, said: "Wherever I am is German culture." The German-Jewish Auschwitz prisoner could not have made such a bold assertion, even if by chance he had been a Thomas Mann. He could not claim German culture as his possession, because his claim found no sort of social justification. Among the émigrés a tiny minority was able to constitute itself as German culture, even if there was not exactly a Thomas Mann among them. In Auschwitz, however, the isolated individual had to relinquish all of German culture, including Dürer and Reger, Gryphius and Trakl, to even the lowest SS man.

But also where it was possible to erect the naïve and admissible illusion of the "good" and the "bad" Germany, of the miserable sculptor Thorak, who might be the property of Hitler, and the great Tilman Riemenschneider, with whom one artificially identified—even there, in the end, the intellect had to capitulate unconditionally in the face of reality. For this there are manifold reasons, and it is difficult first to keep them apart and then, as one should, to synthesize them. I will disregard the purely physical ones, although I really don't know if that is permissible, for in the final analysis every camp inmate was certainly subject to the law of his greater or lesser power of physical resistance. In any event, it is clear that the entire question of the effectiveness of the intellect can

no longer be raised where the subject, faced directly with death through hunger or exhaustion, is not only de-intellectualized, but in the actual sense of the word dehumanized. The so-called Mussulman, as the camp language termed the prisoner who was giving up and was given up by his comrades, no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts good or bad, noble or base, intellectual or unintellectual. He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions. As hard as it may be for us to do so, we must exclude him from our considerations. I can proceed only from my own situation, the situation of an inmate who went hungry, but did not starve to death, who was beaten, but not totally destroyed, who had wounds, but not deadly ones, who thus objectively still possessed that substratum on which, in principle, the human spirit can stand and exist. But it always stood on weak legs, and it stood the test badly, that is the whole sad truth. I have already spoken, alludingly, of capitulation or, in other words, of the ineffectual fizzling out of esthetic associations and recollections. In most cases they brought no consolation, at times they appeared as pain or derision; most frequently they trickled away in a feeling of complete indifference.

Now there were, to be sure, exceptions, which arose in certain conditions of mental intoxication. I recall how an orderly from the sick barracks once gave me a plate of sweetened grits, which I greedily devoured and thereby reached a state of extraordinary spiritual euphoria. With deep emotion I thought first of the phenomenon of human kindness. That was joined by the image of the good Joachim Ziemssen from Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. And suddenly my consciousness was chaotically packed to the brim with the content of books, fragments of music I had heard, and—as I could not help but imagine—original philosophic thoughts. A wild longing for things of the spirit took possession of me, accompanied by a penetrating self-pity that brought tears to my eyes. At the same time, in a layer of my consciousness that had remained clear I was fully aware of the pseudoquality of this short-lived mental exaltation. It was a genuine state of intoxication, evoked by physical influences. Subsequent conversations with campmates allow me to conclude that I was by no means the only one who under such conditions briefly attained inner fortification. My fellow sufferers frequently experienced such euphoria too, whether while eating or while enjoying a rare cigarette. Like all intoxications they left behind a dreary, hangover-like feeling of emptiness

and shame. They were thoroughly false and are poor proof of the value of the spirit. But esthetic notions, and everything that might emerge in their wake, play only a limited, and not even the most important, role in the mental life of the intellectual. More essential is analytic thinking; in the face of terror we might expect it to provide support and direction.

But here, too, I arrive, and arrived, at disappointing results. Not only was rational-analytic thinking in the camp, and particularly in Auschwitz, of no help, but it led straight into a tragic dialectic of self-destruction. What I mean by this is not difficult to explain. First of all, the intellectual did not so easily acknowledge the unimaginable conditions as a given fact as did the nonintellectual. Long practice in questioning the phenomena of everyday reality prevented him from simply adjusting to the realities of the camp, because these stood in all-too-sharp a contrast to everything that he had regarded until then as possible and humanly acceptable. As a free man he always associated only with people who were open to humane and reasonable argumentation, and he absolutely did not want to comprehend what now truly was not at all complicated: namely, that in regard to him, the prisoner, the SS was employing a logic of destruction that in itself operated just as consistently as the logic of life preservation did in the outside world. You always had to be clean-shaven, but it was strictly forbidden to possess razor or scissors, and you went to the barber only once every two weeks. On threat of punishment no button could be missing on the striped inmate suit, but if you lost one at work, which was unavoidable, there was practically no chance to replace it. You had to be strong, but you were systematically weakened. Upon entrance to the camp everything was taken from you, but then you were derided by the robbers because you owned nothing. The prisoner who was not particularly used to thinking discriminatingly mostly noted these circumstances with a certain equanimity, the same equanimity that had evidenced itself on the outside in such assertions as: "There have to be poor people and rich people" or "There will always be wars." He took note of them, adjusted to them, and in favorable instances triumphed over them. The intellectual, however, revolted against them in the impotency of abstract thought. In the beginning the defiant wisdom of folly held true for him: What surely may not be, cannot be. But only in the beginning.

The rejection of the SS logic, the revolt that turned inward, the muted murmuring of such incantations as: "But that is not possible," did

not last long. After a certain time there inevitably appeared something that was more than mere resignation and that we may designate as an acceptance not only of the SS logic but also of the SS system of values. And once again the intellectual prisoner had it harder than the unintellectual. For the latter there had never been a universal humane logic, rather only a consistent system of self-preservation. Yes, he had said on the outside: "There must be poor people and rich people," but in the context of this recognition he had fought the battle of the poor against the rich and had not at all perceived it to be a contradiction. For him the camp logic was merely the step-by-step intensification of economic logic, and one opposed this intensification with a useful mixture of resignation and the readiness to defend oneself. The intellectual, however, who after the collapse of his initial inner resistance had recognized that what may not be, very well could be, who experienced the logic of the SS as a reality that proved itself by the hour, now took a few fateful steps further in his thinking. Were not those who were preparing to destroy him in the right, owing to the undeniable fact that they were the stronger ones? Thus, absolute intellectual tolerance and the methodical doubting of the intellectual became factors in his autodestruction. Yes, the SS could carry on just as it did: there are no natural rights, and moral categories come and go like the fashions. A Germany existed that drove Jews and political opponents to their death, since it believed that only in this way could it become a full reality. And what of it? Greek civilization was built on slavery and an Athenian army had run wild on the Island of Melos as had the SS in Ukraine. Countless people had been sacrificed as far back as the light of history reaches, and mankind's eternal progress was only a naïve belief of the nineteenth century anyhow. "Left, two, three, four" was a ritual just like any other. Against the horrors there wasn't much to say. The Via Appia had been lined with crucified slaves and over in Birkenau the stench of cremated human bodies was spreading. One was not Crassus here, but Spartacus, that was all. "Dam up the Rhine with their corpses; piled high with their bones, flow he foaming about the Pfalz"; with these words Kleist poetically addressed the Rhine and, who knows, had he been given the power, he might have translated his cadaver phantasies into reality.⁸ A General von Kleist was in command somewhere on the Russian front and perhaps was piling up the corpses of Jews and political commissars. That is the way history was and that is the way

it is. One had fallen under its wheel and doffed one's cap when a murderer came along. Once the intellectual's first resistance had flagged, with all his knowledge and analyses he had less with which to oppose his destroyers than the unintellectual. Certainly, the latter stood more stiffly at attention before them and for that reason also pleased them more; for the rest, however, he fought them more spontaneously and effectively through systematic skulking and cleverly executed thefts than did his contemplative comrade.

More than his unintellectual mates the intellectual in the camp was lamed by his historically and sociologically explicable deeper respect for power; in fact, the intellectual always and everywhere has been totally under the sway of power. He was, and is, accustomed to doubt it intellectually, to subject it to his critical analysis, and yet in the same intellectual process to capitulate to it. The capitulation became entirely unavoidable when there was no visible opposition to the hostile force. Although outside gigantic armies might battle the destroyer, in the camp one heard of it only from afar and was really unable to believe it. The power structure of the SS state towered up before the prisoner monstrously and indomitably, a reality that could not be escaped and that therefore finally seemed *reasonable*. No matter what his thinking may have been on the outside, in this sense here he became a Hegelian: in the metallic brilliance of its totality the SS state appeared as a state in which the idea was becoming reality.

First a brief personal confession: I entered the prisons and the concentration camps as an agnostic and, on April 15, 1945, freed by the British in Bergen-Belsen, I left the Inferno as an agnostic. At no time could I discover within me the possibility for belief, not even when I lay bound in solitary confinement, knowing that my file was stamped "Troop Demoralization," and for that reason constantly expecting to be hauled off for execution. Also, I was never bound by a particular political ideology, nor was I ever indebted to one. Yet I must confess that I felt, and still feel, great admiration for both my religiously and politically committed comrades. They may have been "intellectual" in the sense we have adopted here, or they may not have been, that was not important. One way or the other, in the decisive moments their political or religious belief was an inestimable help to them, while we sceptical and humanistic intellectuals took recourse, in vain, to our literary, philosophical, and artistic household gods. Whether they were militant Marxists, sectarian Jehovah's Wit-

nesses, or practicing Catholics, whether they were highly educated national economists and theologians or less versed workers and peasants, their belief or their ideology gave them that firm foothold in the world from which they spiritually unhinged the SS state. Under conditions that defy the imagination they conducted Mass, and as Orthodox Jews they fasted on the Day of Atonement although they actually lived the entire year in a condition of raging hunger. They held Marxist discussions on the future of Europe or they simply persevered in saying: the Soviet Union will and must win. They survived better or died with more dignity than their irreligious or unpolitical intellectual comrades, who often were infinitely better educated and more practiced in exact thinking. I still see before me the young Polish priest who had no living language in common with me and who therefore spoke to me in Latin of his faith. "*Voluntas hominis it ad malum*," he said and glanced sorrowfully at a Kapo who was just passing by and who was feared for his brutality. "But God's goodness is immeasurable and thus it will triumph." Our religiously or politically committed comrades were not at all, or only a little, astonished that in the camp the unimaginable became reality. Whoever turned away from God, said the pious Christians and Jews, had to reach the point where he perpetrated or suffered the atrocities of Auschwitz. The Marxists claimed that capitalism, which had entered its final fascist stage, must become a slaughterer of human beings. Here nothing unheard-of occurred, but only what they, the ideologically schooled or God-believing men, had always expected or at least considered possible. Both the Christians and the Marxists, who already on the outside had taken a very subjective view of concrete reality, detached themselves from it here too in a way that was both impressive and dismaying. Their kingdom, in any event, was not the Here and Now, but the Tomorrow and Someplace, the very distant Tomorrow of the Christian, glowing in chiliastic light, or the utopian-worldly Tomorrow of the Marxists. The grip of the horror reality was weaker where from the start reality had been placed in the framework of an unalterable idea. Hunger was not hunger as such, but the necessary consequence of atheism or of capitalistic decay. A beating or death in the gas chamber was the renewed sufferings of the Lord or a natural political martyrdom. The early Christians had suffered that way, and so had the plagued peasants during the German Peasants' Revolt. Every Christian was a Saint Sebastian and every Marxist a Thomas Münzer.

Both Christians and Marxists scorned us sceptic-humanistic intellec-

tuals, the former mildly, the latter impatiently and brusquely. There were hours in the camp when I asked myself if their scorn was not justified. Not that I desired their political or religious belief for myself or that I even would have held this to be possible. I was not in the least bit curious about a religious grace that for me did not exist, or about an ideology whose errors and false conclusions I felt I had seen through. I did not want to be one with my believing comrades, but I would have wished to be like them: unshakable, calm, strong. What I felt to comprehend at that time still appears to me as a certainty: whoever is, in the broadest sense, a believing person, whether his belief be metaphysical or bound to concrete reality, transcends himself. He is not the captive of his individuality; rather he is part of a spiritual continuity that is interrupted nowhere, not even in Auschwitz. He is both more estranged from reality and closer to it than his unbelieving comrade. Further from reality because in his Finalistic attitude he ignores the given contents of material phenomena and fixes his sight on a nearer or more distant future; but he is also closer to reality because for just this reason he does not allow himself to be overwhelmed by the conditions around him and thus he can strongly influence them. For the unbelieving person reality, under adverse circumstances, is a force to which he submits; under favorable ones it is material for analysis. For the believer reality is clay that he molds, a problem that he solves.

That in the camp there could be just as little understanding between the two types, the believers and the nonbelievers, as on the outside, hardly needs to be said. Religious and political comrades paid no attention to us, be it in tolerance, in the willingness to help, or in anger. "You must realize one thing," a practicing Jew once told me, "that here your intelligence and your education are worthless. But I have the certainty that our God will avenge us." A leftist radical German prisoner, who had been thrown into the camps already in 1933, said more pithily: "Now you're sitting here, you bourgeois bullshitters, and tremble in fear of the SS. We don't tremble, and even if we croak miserably here, we still know that after we're gone our comrades are going to line the whole pack of them up against the wall." Both of them transcended themselves and projected themselves into the future. They were no windowless monads; they stood open, wide open onto a world that was not the world of Auschwitz.

The nonbelieving intellectuals were impressed by this bearing, that

is certain. Yet I am aware of only extremely few instances of conversion. Only in exceptional cases did the magnificent example of his comrades make a Christian or a Marxist *engagé* of the sceptic-intellectual. Mostly he turned away and said to himself: an admirable and redeeming illusion, but an illusion nonetheless. At times he also rebelled ferociously against his believing comrades' exclusive claim to the truth. To speak of God's boundless mercy appeared outrageous to him, given the presence of a so-called senior camp inmate, a powerfully built German professional criminal who was known to have literally trampled a number of prisoners to death. In the same way, he regarded it as shockingly narrow when the Marxists unswervingly characterized the SS as the police force of the bourgeoisie and the camp as the natural product of capitalism, whereas anyone in his right mind had to see that Auschwitz had nothing to do with capitalism or any other economic system, but that it was the monstrous product of sick minds and perverted souls. One could respect one's believing comrades and still more than once mutter to oneself with a shake of the head: madness, what madness! But the intellectuals fell silent and they found no arguments when the others, as described above, reproached them for the emptiness of their intellectual values. And with that I conclude my digression and return to the role of the intellect in Auschwitz, and repeat clearly what I have already said: if the intellect was not centered around a religious or political belief it was of no help, or of little help. It abandoned us. It constantly vanished from sight whenever those questions were involved that were once called the "ultimate" ones.

What, for example, was the attitude of the intellectual in Auschwitz toward death? A vast, unsurveyable topic, which can be covered here only fleetingly, in double time! I will assume it is known that the camp inmate did not live next door to, but in the same room with death. Death was omnipresent. The selections for the gas chambers took place at regular intervals. For a trifle prisoners were hanged on the roll call grounds, and to the beat of light march music their comrades had to file past the bodies—Eyes right!—that dangled from the gallows. Prisoners died by the score, at the work site, in the infirmary, in the bunker, within the block. I recall times when I climbed heedlessly over piled-up corpses and all of us were too weak or too indifferent even to drag the dead out of the barracks into the open. But as I have said, people have already heard far too much

about this; it belongs to the category of the horrors mentioned at the outset, those which I was advised with good intentions not to discuss in detail.

Here and there someone will perhaps object that the front-line soldier was also constantly surrounded by death and that therefore death in the camp actually had no specific character and posed no incomparable questions. Must I even say that the analogy is false? Just as the life of the front-line soldier, however he may have suffered at times, cannot be compared with that of the camp inmate, death in battle and the prisoner's death are two incommensurables. The soldier died the hero's or victim's death, the prisoner that of an animal intended for slaughter. The soldier was driven into the fire, and it is true that his life was not worth much. Still, the state did not order him to die, but to survive. The final duty of the prisoner, however, was death. The decisive difference lay in the fact that the front-line soldier, unlike the camp inmate, was not only the target, but also the *bearer of death*. Figuratively expressed: death was not only the ax that fell upon him, but it was also the sword in his hand. Even while he was suffering death, he was able to inflict it. Death approached him from without, as his fate, but it also forced its way from inside him as his own will. For him death was both a threat and an opportunity, while for the prisoner it assumed the form of a mathematically determined solution: the Final Solution! These were the conditions under which the intellectual collided with death. Death lay before him, and in him the spirit was still stirring; the latter confronted the former and tried—in vain, to say it straight off—to exemplify its dignity.

The first result was always the total collapse of the *esthetic* view of death. What I am saying is familiar. The intellectual, and especially the intellectual of German education and culture, bears this esthetic view of death within him. It was his legacy from the distant past, at the very latest from the time of German romanticism. It can be more or less characterized by the names Novalis, Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Thomas Mann. For death in its literary, philosophic, or musical form there was no place in Auschwitz. No bridge led from death in Auschwitz to *Death in Venice*. Every poetic evocation of death became intolerable, whether it was Hesse's "Dear Brother Death" or that of Rilke, who sang: "Oh Lord, give each his own death." The esthetic view of death had revealed itself to the intellectual as part of an esthetic *mode of life*; where the latter had been all but forgotten, the former was nothing but an elegant trifle. In the

camp no Tristan music accompanied death, only the roaring of the SS and the Kapos. Since in the social sense the death of a human being was an occurrence that one merely registered in the so-called Political Section of the camp with the set phrase "subtraction due to death," it finally lost so much of its specific content that for the one expecting it, its esthetic embellishment in a way became a brazen demand and, in regard to his comrades, an indecent one.

After the esthetic view of death crumbled, the intellectual faced death defenselessly. If he attempted nonetheless to establish an intellectual and metaphysical relationship to it, he ran up against the reality of the camp, which doomed such an attempt to failure. How did it work in practice? To put it briefly and tritely: just like his unintellectual comrade, the intellectual inmate did not occupy himself with death, but with *dying*. Then, however, the entire problem was reduced to a number of concrete considerations. For example, there was once a conversation in the camp about an SS man who had slit open a prisoner's belly and filled it with sand. It is obvious that in view of such possibilities one was hardly concerned with whether, or *that*, one had to die, but only with *how* it would happen. Inmates carried on conversations about how long it probably takes for the gas in the gas chamber to do its job. One speculated on the painfulness of death by phenol injections. Were you to wish yourself a blow to the skull or a slow death through exhaustion in the infirmary? It was characteristic for the situation of the prisoner in regard to death that only a few decided to "run to the wire," as one said, that is, to commit suicide through contact with the highly electrified barbed wire. The wire was after all a good and rather certain thing, but it was possible that in the attempt to approach it one would be caught first and thrown into the bunker, and that led to a more difficult and more painful dying. Dying was omnipresent, death vanished from sight.

Now of course, no matter where you are, the fear of death is essentially the fear of dying, and Franz Borkenau's claim that the fear of death is the fear of suffocation holds true also for the camp. For all that, if one is free it is possible to entertain thoughts of death that at the same time are not also thoughts of dying, fears of dying. Death in freedom, at least in principle, can be intellectually detached from dying: socially, by infusing it with thoughts of the family that remains behind, of the profession one leaves, and mentally, through the effort, while still being, to feel

a whiff of Nothingness. It goes without saying that such an attempt leads nowhere, that death's contradiction cannot be resolved. Still, the effort contains its own intrinsic dignity: the free person can assume a certain spiritual posture toward death, because for him death is not totally absorbed into the torment of dying. The free person can venture to the outmost limit of thought, because within him there is still a space, however tiny, that is without fear. For the prisoner, however, death had no sting, not one that hurts, not one that stimulates you to think. Perhaps this explains why the camp inmate—and it applies equally to the intellectual as well as to the unintellectual—did experience agonizing fear of certain kinds of dying, but scarcely an actual fear of death. If I may speak of myself, then let me assert here that I never considered myself to be especially brave and probably also am not. Yet, when they once fetched me from my cell after I already had a few months of punitive camp behind me and the SS man gave me the friendly assurance that now I was to be shot, I accepted it with perfect equanimity. "Now you're afraid, aren't you?" the man—who was just having fun—said to me. "Yes," I answered, but more out of complaisance and in order not to provoke him to acts of brutality by disappointing his expectations. No, we were not afraid of death. I clearly recall how comrades in whose blocks selections for the gas chambers were expected did not talk about it, while with every sign of fear and hope they did talk about the consistency of the soup that was to be dispensed. The reality of the camp triumphed effortlessly over death and over the entire complex of the so-called ultimate questions. Here, too, the mind came up against its limits.

All those problems that one designates according to a linguistic convention as "metaphysical" became meaningless. But it was not apathy that made contemplating them impossible; on the contrary, it was the cruel sharpness of an intellect honed and hardened by camp reality. In addition, the emotional powers were lacking with which, if need be, one could have invested vague philosophic concepts and thereby made them subjectively and psychologically meaningful. Occasionally, perhaps that disquieting magus from Alemannic regions came to mind who said that beings appear to us only in the light of Being, but that man forgot Being by fixing on beings.⁴ Well now, Being. But in the camp it was more convincingly apparent than on the outside that beings and the light of Being get you nowhere. You could *be* hungry, *be* tired, *be* sick. To say that one

purely and simply *is*, made no sense. And existence *as such*, to top it off, became definitively a totally abstract and thus empty concept. To reach out beyond concrete reality with words became before our very eyes a game that was not only worthless and an impermissible luxury but also mocking and evil. Hourly, the physical world delivered proof that its insufferableness could be coped with only through means inherent in that world. In other words: nowhere else in the world did reality have as much effective power as in the camp, nowhere else was reality so real. In no other place did the attempt to transcend it prove so hopeless and so shoddy. Like the lyric stanza about the silently standing walls and the flags clanking in the wind, the philosophic declarations also lost their transcendency and then and there became in part objective observations, in part dull chatter. Where they still meant something they appeared trivial, and where they were not trivial they no longer meant anything. We didn't require any semantic analysis or logical syntax to recognize this. A glance at the watchtowers, a sniff of burnt fat from the crematories sufficed.

In the camp the intellect in its totality declared itself to be incompetent. As a tool for solving the tasks put to us it admitted defeat. However, and this is a very essential point, it could be used for its *own abolishment*, and that in itself was something. For it was not the case that the intellectual—if he had not already been destroyed physically—had now become unintellectual or incapable of thinking. On the contrary, only rarely did thinking grant itself a respite. But it nullified itself when at almost every step it ran into its uncrossable borders. The axes of its traditional frames of reference then shattered. Beauty: that was an illusion. Knowledge: that turned out to be a game with ideas. Death veiled itself in all its inscrutability.

If we were sitting together and conversing, perhaps someone would ask me what the intellectual actually salvaged from the camp and brought back with him into our world, which we presumptuously call "normal," what spiritual possession he preserved from his time in the camp. I will attempt to answer, to the extent that I have not anticipated the answer already in what I have related.

I will begin with a few negations. We did not become wiser in Auschwitz, if by wisdom one understands positive knowledge of the world. We perceived nothing there that we would not already have been able to per-

ceive on the outside; not a bit of it brought us practical guidance. In the camp, too, we did not become "deeper," if that calamitous depth is at all a definable intellectual quantity. It goes without saying, I believe, that in Auschwitz we did not become better, more human, more humané, and more mature ethically. You do not observe dehumanized man committing his deeds and misdeeds without having all of your notions of inherent human dignity placed in doubt. We emerged from the camp stripped, robbed, emptied out, disoriented—and it was a long time before we were able even to learn the ordinary language of freedom. Still today, incidentally, we speak it with discomfort and without real trust in its validity.

And yet, the time in the camp was not entirely without value for us (and when I say us, I mean the nonreligious and politically independent intellectuals). For we brought with us the certainty that remains ever unshakable, that for the greatest part the intellect is a *ludus* and that we are nothing more—or, better said, before we entered the camp we were nothing more—than *homines ludentes*. With that we lost a good deal of arrogance, of metaphysical conceit, but also quite a bit of our naïve joy in the intellect and what we falsely imagined was the sense of life. In his newest book, *The Words*, Jean-Paul Sartre said at one point that it took him thirty years to rid himself of traditional philosophical idealism. I can guarantee that it did not take us as long. Mostly, a few weeks in camp sufficed to bring about this philosophical disillusionment, for which other, perhaps infinitely more gifted and penetrating minds must struggle a lifetime.

And so I dare to say that we didn't leave Auschwitz wiser and deeper, but we were no doubt smarter. "Profundity has never clarified the world, Clarity looks more profoundly into its depths," Arthur Schnitzler once said. Nowhere was it easier than in the camp, and particularly in Auschwitz, to assimilate this clever thought. If I may quote once more, and once again an Austrian, then I would like to cite the words that Karl Kraus pronounced in the first years of the Third Reich: "The word fell into a sleep, when that world awoke." Certainly, he said that as a defender of this metaphysical "word," while we former camp inmates borrow the formulation from him and repeat it sceptically as an argument against this "word." The word always dies where the claim of some reality is total. It died for us a long time ago. And we were not even left with the feeling that we must regret its departure.